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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the development of children's perceptions of clothing, particularly as a form of nonverbal communication. Sixteen boys and sixteen girls at five grade levels (kindergarten, second, fourth, sixth and eighth grades) were interviewed individually. A series of six questions was asked to determine whether the children used clothing to infer knowledge of others or to send messages about themselves. Responses indicated three developmental levels in children's perception of social meaning of clothing: (1) a focus on superficial characteristics of clothing -- its colors, materials and decorative detail (kindergarten children); (2) a focus on inferences about social and personality characteristics, like cultural background, wealth, and styles of personal behavior (second grade children); and (3) a simultaneous inference of personality traits and compatibility with a particular social group (middle school students). When data were analyzed for sex differences, fewer differences were found than in a similar study of college students conducted earlier. It was concluded that the study demonstrated clear developmental differences and illustrated the value of investigating children's knowledge of highly familiar topics like clothing. (CM)

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Children's Impressions of the Social Meaning of Clothing

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Children's Impressions of the Social Meaning of Clothing

People have traditionally used clothing to form impressions of others (Horn, 1968; Rosencranz, 1972; Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977; Ryan, 1965). Research s have documented that people infer sex, age, occupation, socio-economic status, attitudes, interests, and personality on the basis of clothing. In addition, there appear to be sex differences in the way men and women perceive the social psychological significance of clothing. For example, Alexander (cited in Ryan, 1965) found that men believed clothing was important for status while women believed clothing enhanced self-confidence and morale.

Not only do men and women draw social inferences about others, but they also tend to use clothing to send messages about themselves. Stone (cited in Livesley & Bromley, 1973) stated that most people assume that their appearance reflects their tastes, attitudes, and values. However, women seem to be more concerned by this than men. In an earlier study we did (Halperin & Parr, 1977), we found that college women cared more about what others thought about their dress than did the college men. In addition, women tended to wear dressier clothes than did men to such places as college classes, parties and restaurants.

Very little is known about how or why this sex difference in clothing occurs or when this difference emerges. The present study investigated the development of children's perceptions of clothing, particularly as a form of nonverbal communication. Since clothing is a very familiar topic to children, it has the additional value of allowing us to see early cognitive changes. Measures of cognitive development reflect both structural change and content knowledge. With a highly familiar topic, it should be easier to detect early transformations in thinking.

We interviewed sixteen boys and sixteen girls at five grade levels--kindergarten, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth. Although we selected the children from an elementary and middle school in Baltimore, Maryland, as well as from an elementary and middle school in Newark, Delaware, t-tests revealed there were no differences in how the students responded to the questions on the basis of where they lived. So the data we report here are pooled over location.

The interview questions assessed the children's clothing knowledge and behaviors. For example, we asked them to describe the kinds of clothing they wore in three different settings (school, play, and special place) and to explain their reasons. We then asked them to respond to a series of questions which determined whether they noticed the clothing of others, whether

they learned anything about a person from the clothing worn, and whether they cared what others thought about their own clothing.

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. A preliminary coding scheme was developed to categorize children's explanations and their open-ended responses. Each author independently scored a subset of 20 transcripts. The ratings were compared and the inconsistencies were resolved by refining the classification system. We then independently scored a second set of 20 transcripts and a reliability estimate of .96 was calculated.

Our first question concerned whether there were age and sex differences in the kinds of clothes children wore to school. Children's responses were assigned a dressiness score based upon ratings which we obtained in a previous study (Halperin & Parr, 1977). Old, torn clothes were assigned a value of 0; jeans, a value of 1; casual slacks, a value of 2; skirts as well as dress slacks, a value of 3; dress slacks with a blazer or sportcoat, a value of 4; and a dress or a suit, a value of 5.

Analysis of variance results revealed significant main effects and an interaction. Girls tended to dress up more for school than did boys, younger children dressed up more than did older children, and the difference in dressiness between girls

and boys decreased as the children became older. The differences were primarily due to the young girls who wore dresses which are much dressier than jeans and denims.

We also coded the reasons students gave for their selections of school clothes. In some cases, similar categories were collapsed for the analyses. The reason most frequently given by both boys and girls was comfort. Thirty-four percent of the boys and 32% of the girls gave this reason. There was a slight tendency for girls to be more concerned about social norms than were boys. For example, a child who gave this reason might say something like, "I wear jeans because that's what most kids in my school wear." Twenty-two percent of the girls gave this reason as compared with 16% of the boys. Girls also seemed to be more influenced by their mothers. Twenty-two percent of the girls said that their mothers influenced their clothing choices, while only 11% of the boys cited such influence.

An analysis of variance performed on each category of the reasons by grade and sex as the dimensions of analysis, indicated that there was a significant grade effect for mother's influence. T-tests revealed a significant decrease between second and fourth grades in the extent to which mothers select their children's clothing. Another category--peer conformity--

also revealed a significant age related pattern. Between fourth and sixth grade, children became very concerned that they wore the same types of clothes as their peers.

The main focus of the study centered on children's awareness of clothing as a form of nonverbal communication. A series of six questions was used to determine whether children used clothing to infer knowledge of others or to send messages about themselves. Three questions assessed the child's knowledge of him or herself and three questions probed the student's understanding of the perceptions of others. Developmentally, one would expect the knowledge of oneself to precede knowledge of others, since inferring the thoughts of another demands non-egocentric thinking.

The first two questions determined whether children noticed the clothes of others and whether they believed others noticed their clothes. Responses to the question, "Do you notice the clothes that other children wear?" revealed that older children more often acknowledged noticing other students' clothes, and that girls paid more attention to clothing than did boys. A second analysis performed without the kindergarten children, removed the sex and grade effects, indicating that the main difference occurred with the youngest group of children.

In addition, we analyzed the pattern of reasons for age and sex differences. When asked to explain what they noticed about the clothes of other children, younger students tended to list particular articles of clothes, colors, and types of material or to specify the clothes certain people wore. Not surprisingly, t-tests indicated the frequency of these superficial types of responses decreased with grade level. Older students were more likely to infer functional characteristics of the clothing, such as old, new, torn or dirty. This reason increased steadily and peaked at fourth grade for the girls and at sixth grade for the boys. Adolescents showed a concern for peer conformity. This response was most frequently given at the eighth grade level.

The next two questions dealt with information that could be inferred from clothing. There were significant age differences for both questions. However, the age effect for the question, "Can you tell anything about a new child by the clothes he/she is wearing?" was due to the kindergarteners' responses. By second grade, 75% of the students believed clothing communicated something about the wearer. However, it was not until eighth grade that 75% of the students recognized that others can form impressions of them on the basis of clothing. We know this because we asked children to respond to the question, "Do you

think the teacher or other children form impressions of you because of what you wear?"

In describing what they could learn from clothing, young children again focused on superficial characteristics, while older children used clothing to infer background variables and personality characteristics. A curious finding was that boys, especially second grade boys, were more attuned to clothing as a reflection of one's ethnic or national background. A similar pattern was found for second grade girls. Perhaps this increased concern was due to a second grade curriculum which stressed costumes and customs of foreign people.

Approximately 45% of the children responded "no" to the question, "Do you think the teacher or the other children form impressions of you because of what you wear?" Analysis of these children's reasons also indicated developmental differences. For example, a response like "clothes don't matter; personality is what counts," showed a significant increase with age. T-tests revealed that the big increase occurred between second and fourth grade.

The last two questions of the six which assessed children's awareness of clothing as nonverbal communication focused on whether a child thought others cared about his/her clothes and whether the child cared what others thought of his/her dress.

There were no overall sex or age differences to these questions. However, after analyzing their reasons we found that second and fourth graders were more likely to respond that others cared only in certain situations. For example, one child said, "My teacher doesn't care--except on picture days--that's when she wants us to get dressed up." Sixth and eighth graders maintained that others cared because one's appearance reflects on one's friends and school. One adolescent said, "Sure my friends care what I look like; they don't want to be associated with someone who looks weird."

For the question which asked, "Do you care what others may think about the clothes you wear?" again there were differences in the reasons given by children of different ages. Young children tended to be concerned with the negative consequences of inappropriate dress. They often stated they did not want to be laughed at because of their clothes. Older children were more concerned that their dress be accepted by their peer group. That is, the middle school students often stated that their friends would be embarrassed if they dressed poorly.

In general, this study found fewer sex differences than had been expected. When asked to list reasons for selecting a new garment, girls were more likely to consider what others thought about the new clothing. Girls were also more sensitive

to compliments about their clothing, and young girls were more likely to notice the clothing of others than were the young boys. Given that in our earlier study, college women cared more about others' opinions of their clothing than did the college men, we had hoped to find the same pattern with younger subjects. We did not. It may be that a girl's experiences during adolescence are critical for developing her sensitivity to how others evaluate her and how she presents herself to them.

Overall, the children's responses showed changes which fit with developmental theory. It is possible to analyze children's social impressions of clothing according to a three level model. At the first level, children focus on the superficial characteristics of clothing--its colors, materials, and decorative detail. Kindergarten children seem to operate primarily at this level. By second grade, children begin to move beyond the surface aspects to infer such characteristics as cultural background, wealth, and styles of interpersonal behavior. This focus on social and personality characteristics could be considered a second order inference. These first two levels of inferences correspond to person perception studies in the literature such as the works of Peevers and Secord (1973) and Livesley and Bromley (1973). According to our data middle school students demonstrate an even higher level of analysis.

They not only infer personality characteristics but also consider simultaneously, whether a person will fit in a particular social group. These three levels appear consistently in the children's responses to all six questions.

In summary, the study demonstrates the value of investigating children's knowledge of highly familiar topics. Our data not only reflected clear developmental differences, but indicated that even young children are capable of going beyond superficial elements.

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